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ABSTRACT

Perhaps the most effective way to increase the utilization of behavioral science knowledge by policy-makers is for the behavioral scientist to become one. The psychologist who serves as a policy-maker becomes aware of the policy issues in addition to relevant empirical evidence. The author, a psychologist, relates his experience as a member of a policy-making group asked by the Massachusetts Legislature to develop legislation to protect the interests of children who are asked to donate organs to a dying sibling. His anticipated role as a member of the committee was to be a statistician-methodologist who could help the group critically evaluate any data presented to it. Research questions which were generated by the problem included: What is the psychological impact of donorship? and How can the moral decision-making of children be measured? It was found that some of these questions exposed gaps in basic theoretical knowledge. The author recommends that, for those who wish to bridge psychology and policy-making, the goals should be to act as broadly educated generalists instead of narrow researchers, gain experience in making decisions, get regularly involved in policy-making bodies, and build the problems encountered in this experience into applied research programs. (Author/AV)

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Psychologist as Policy-Maker[1]

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[1]Paper presented at the 1978 American Psychological Association Convention, Toronto; as part of the symposium titled "Personality of the Research Environment: Implications for Knowledge Utilization in the Administration of Justice.

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Perhaps the most effective way to increase the utilization of behavioral science knowledge by policy-makers is for the behavioral scientist to become one. The psychologist who serves as a policy-maker (or shaper) is more aware than other psychologists of the policy issues and more aware than other policy-makers of the relevant empirical evidence that may be available. As a designer of future research (s)he is as aware of what data are needed as the prospective consumers of the findings because (s)he is one of the consumers.

The communication problems inherent in bridging the worlds of psychologists and policy-shapers are obviated when the same person has one foot in each. No longer does the policy person have to risk not knowing the language of research, not knowing the substantive theories and methodologies, not knowing what findings are available or where to find them, not knowing how to convert needs for new knowledge into researchable questions. No longer does the research person have to risk producing research that is insufficiently on point so that it does not help, or is relevant but not noticed, or is misinterpreted or badly applied to policy questions. Anyone who has been on either side of this abyss has at least occasionally experienced the frustration of not understanding or being understood, has been tempted to abandon the effort by blaming "that dumb researcher" or "that dumb policy-maker", and retreat to the comfort of our professional brothers and sisters of the same tribe. When both worlds meet in the same person's head, communication problems are gone, and the product is going to be about as good as the person's knowledge and skills. Such a person also will serve as a good translator for the

research-types involved in the effort who may not adequately comprehend the needs of the policy-makers, and vice versa. This can represent a great saving in time, effort, and misunderstanding.

What I am about to discuss is essentially a case study of one psychologist's experience as a part-time public policy-recommender. Certain aspects of the experience appeared in a recent article in the American Psychologist (Saks, 1978), and will overlap somewhat with the present paper. But while that article was primarily concerned with the contribution of substantive empirical and theoretical knowledge to the policy problem, the focus of the present paper is on the psychologist's role as a policy-shaper, and the nature of relationships with the two tribes of interest--the policy people and the academic-psychologist research colleagues.

The problem situation and the policy-making setting. The Massachusetts Legislature established a Special Legislative Commission Concerning Human Clinical Investigation and Experimental Therapy, with a Subcommittee on Transplants from Children. Its purpose was to develop legislation to protect the interests of children who are asked to donate organs or tissue to a dying sibling. Transplant procedures call into being perplexing ethico-legal dilemmas. While our laws recognize the right of adults to control the use of their own bodies, to grant or deny the use or gift of a part of it, who can grant such consent for a child? Normally that power rests with the parent or guardian. In the instance of transplants, it cannot be the parents, whose interest in the welfare of the recipient conflicts with their interest in the welfare of the donor. A very important go or no-go decision has to be made, yet no one

immediately involved has the ethical or legal right to make it. So what has usually happened is that the parents ask a court to authorize the taking of tissue or organs from the donor child, the court appoints a guardian ad litem for the minor child and the decision ultimately is made by the court. The issues to be dealt with included the proper role of the guardian ad litem (e.g., decide for the child, decide with the child, argue against the transplant to force the issues to be heard and decided by the court), the decision-making procedure to be employed (e.g., shall it be adversarial, in a court or other agency, if so, what court, what agency, what procedures), all aimed at insuring the balanced protection of the competing interests in making a go or no-go decision on a transplant. The legislature wanted to improve on the conduct of decision-making in this and related areas, and the Subcommittee's task was to recommend legislation that would do the job.

Dynamic of selection as a policy-shaper. How does a psychologist come to be appointed to such a subcommittee? Being in the right place at the right time and knowing the right people is a large part of it. Although this statement is not the sort of thing professionals like to go around admitting, it reflects my experience and is the overwhelming conclusion of social psychological research on related questions. I was appointed by a friend who happened to be the Subcommittee Chairman, and was appointed at a chance encounter at a University recreational facility. Had I not known him, or not encountered him at a moment when he was excited about the Subcommittee, I would most likely not have been appointed. Professional competence may be a necessary ingredient, but it is not sufficient. That power and knowledge travel along informal social networks

has been the consistent conclusion of those who have studied such varied matters as the diffusion of medical innovations, academic employment practices, the impact of mass media on public opinion, and the acceptance of scientific advances (see review in Saks, 1978). I have suggested elsewhere that there exists a "culture of policy" and that bridging the gap between social scientists and policy-shapers requires that we become a part of that culture or establish links to it.

Anticipated versus actual role of the psychologist. As a psychologist I was not expected to have useful substantive knowledge that other Subcommittee members (primarily lawyers) would not also have. After all, everyone knows how people feel, think, react. Everyone is an expert on behavior. Not at first knowing much of the issues to be confronted, I could not have said what, if any, substantive contributions I could make. Not knowing the content of my field's knowledge, those intimately familiar with the policy questions could not know what light could be gained from a social psychologist's knowledge. My contribution was to be as a statistician-methodologist who could help the Subcommittee critically evaluate any data presented to it. In the earliest stages of the Subcommittee work, given our mutual ignorance, this seemed to me also to be a perfectly reasonable role in which to be cast. To the mutual suprise of the psychologist and the policy people, numerous issues arose to which psychological knowledge was able to add light. Although psychological knowledge was able to make a contribution in this instance, the mutual ignorance of psychologists and policy people assures that in many instances the knowledge gap will not be bridged. More interdisciplinary friendships, more accidental encounters, and more psychologists in policy-shaping posts may improve the situation in the future.

Applying basic research. The familiar distinction between applied and basic research is one I find more an interference than a help. In my view the difference is essentially one of knowledge residing at different levels of abstraction. Basic research seeks to make more abstract, more general statements about the world. Applied research seeks to answer more specific and concrete questions. Well conceived applied research can contribute to basic knowledge. And certainly, basic theory ought to lead to deductions which inform us about specific questions. In my experience basic research does produce knowledge which is capable of being applied, and most of my contributions to the Subcommittee were of that nature. My concern has to do with a failure of many psychologists to be able to derive predictions, applications, and other dedudtions from the basic knowledge, and the failure of this skill to be taught in graduate programs. The reason it is not is simple enough--people who have no need to apply their knowledge do not become very will practiced at doing it. Nor do they recognize it as a skill that is worth teaching. Some of my colleagues went so far as to frown upon applying basic knowledge and to suggest that such issues be left to the wisdom of lawyers and judges. Granted, this is not a familiar refrain among psychologists. But if the policy-makers' decisions are to be better informed, we will have to become better skilled at informing them.

Research ideas generated by the problem and academic colleague reactions. Researchable questions quite naturally evolved from the legal problem. What is the psychological impact of donorship? Can a mathematical model be developed to predict actuarially the substantive decision-making of prospective donors? How could we measure the moral decision-making of

children? Some of these questions exposed gaps in basic theoretical knowledge. For example, all existing theories of moral decision making are process theories and are incapable of making content predictions. Further, if I carried out research on these questions, I would automatically be more sensitive to the knowledge needs of the legislature and the courts and the research would be more likely to produce knowledge useful to them. Some of my academic colleagues were curious and helpful. Others frowned upon researching such questions; they were too complex, might require insufficiently rigorous designs, and so on. Granted that we should not abandon methodological rigor in the pursuit of relevance. But that is not the only choice before us. We could endeavor, as many are doing, notably evaluation researchers, to be ingenious enough methodologists that we can be both relevant and rigorous.

Preparation for policy-making leadership. One theory of how applied social research affects policy is that people trained in social science become policy-makers and the decisions they make benefit from their professional training. Viewed in that light, my role as a part-time policy-shaper was not so strange. If this is, indeed, a major model of the impact of social research, we are not, as I have already discussed, prepared to translate our basic knowledge into application. If we are asked to take the next step--leadership of a policy shaping body (even a rather minor one of a state legislature)--we are altogether unprepared to do so. When the Chairman of our Subcommittee had to leave to take a position out of state, the invitation to succeed him passed through an almost linear chain of succession ordered according to the closeness of association with the former Chairman. Like those before me, I refused.

But my reason for declining the chair was more unusual than theirs. I simply did not feel qualified. Psychologists are educated to be information creators, conceptualizers, and transmitters, not to be leaders of policy-making bodies. We do not expect ever to be called upon to do it, have rarely or never seen our colleagues do it, and simply are not ready when it happens. The most immediate solution is simply to do it. Don't wait until you are "prepared". Policy-making bodies are not so different from departmental committees. (So perhaps we do receive some incidental training.) If we need specific legal expertise, we can appoint a committee counsel. The longer term solutions, for those who wish to bridge psychology and policy-making, is to be less narrowly "researchers" and more broadly educated generalists, to gain experience in making decisions (not merely suspending judgment and gathering data, which we are admittedly pretty good at), getting regularly involved in policy-making bodies, and to build as much of this as can be done into applied research graduate programs.

REFERENCES

Saks, M. J. Social psychological contributions to a Legislative Subcommittee on organ and tissue transplants. American Psychologist, 1978, 33, 680-690.